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Michele Bachmann's alternate universe

By Dana Milbank

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The president was lofty.

"We will move forward together, or not at all - for the challenges we face are bigger than party, and bigger than politics," he said in his [State of the Union address](#).

The official Republican response, too, aimed high.

"Americans are skeptical of both political parties, and that skepticism is justified - especially when it comes to spending," said Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. "So hold all of us accountable."

And then there was Michele Bachmann.

As the leader of the Tea Party Caucus in the House, the Minnesota Republican gave her own, unauthorized response to the State of the Union, live from the National Press Club, filmed by Fox News, broadcast live on CNN and telecast by the Tea Party Express. It had all the altitude of a punch to the gut.

"After the \$700 billion bailout, the trillion-dollar stimulus, and the massive budget bill with over 9,000 earmarks, many of you implored Washington to please stop spending money we don't have," Bachmann said. "But, instead of cutting, we saw an unprecedented explosion of government spending and debt, unlike anything we have seen in the history of our country."

Armed with charts and photographs, but not a word of fellowship, she railed against "a bureaucracy that tells us which light bulbs to buy, and which may put 16,500 IRS agents in charge of policing President Obama's health care bill."

The State of the Nation was conciliatory Tuesday night, as each side made gestures to the other, and lawmakers for the first time crossed the aisle to sit - and applaud - together. But Bachmann and her fellow Tea Partiers raged on.

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, for one, was not pleased. "Paul Ryan is giving the official Republican response," he said when asked earlier about her dueling response. "Michele Bachmann, just as the other 534 members of the House and Senate, are going to have opinions as to the State of the Union."

For Republican leaders, it's more than a one-night problem. Bachmann is bidding to become the new voice of the opposition, replacing the titular leaders of the GOP.

In the past week alone, Bachmann visited Iowa to test the waters for a presidential campaign and scored fifth in a field of 20 presidential candidates in a [New Hampshire straw poll](#), besting such

established figures as Mitch Daniels, Newt Gingrich, Mike Huckabee, John Thune, Haley Barbour and Mike Pence.

Returning to Washington, she [hosted Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia](#) at a gathering of her Tea Party Caucus, then went for an appearance on "The O'Reilly Factor" on Fox News and a keynote speech to the March for Life's annual dinner. And that was all before her Tea Party response to the State of the Union address.

Two dozen reporters chased her down a hall in the Capitol complex this week, seeking an explanation for the speech. "I never took this as a State of the Union response, necessarily," she said innocently. The title above the text of her speech her office released Tuesday night: "Bachmann's Response to State of the Union."

Party leaders, intimidated by the Tea Party activists, have little control over Bachmann. They denied her the [party leadership post](#) she sought, but when it came to her plan to upstage the authorized GOP response Tuesday night, the most House Speaker John Boehner could do was grumble that it's "[a little unusual](#)."

Bachmann is more than a little unusual. Her greatest hits are now legendary: Her suggestion that President Obama and the Democrats are "anti-American," her caution that the census could be used to create internment camps, her accusation that Obama is running a "gangster government" and her request that people be "armed and dangerous" to fight climate-change legislation.

At a time colleagues have toned down their words, Bachmann went to Iowa and proclaimed: "If we want to kill Obamacare and we want to end socialized medicine, it must be done in the next election!"

"It is my firm belief that America is under greater attack now . . . than at any time," she warned, voicing "grave doubt" about the nation's survival. She presented to the assembled Iowans a [novel view of American history](#) in which the "founders . . . worked tirelessly until slavery was no more." In Bachmann's version, "It didn't matter the color of their skin. . . . Once you got here, we were all the same."

She was at it again Tuesday night. She ignored the bipartisan seating plan and placed herself between two other Tea Party House Republicans. Soon after, she was on air herself, reading out choice slogans: "failed stimulus . . . repeal Obamacare . . . government-run coverage . . . voted out the big-spending politicians."

It was angry, and at times wrong, but Bachmann has gone far with that formula.

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